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Heimat's Environmental Turn

Paper given at ASLE 2011 conference, Bloomington, In., June 2011

Axel Goodbody

The question my paper sets out to answer is this: What has the German concept of Heimat to offer to ecocritical debates on the role of place-belonging in environmental consciousness? Or, more explicitly, how do the changes which the understanding of Heimat has undergone since the 1970s, in which its environmental dimension has come increasingly to the fore, and how do contemporary German literary representations of home relate to developments over the same period in space and place theory on the one hand, and to recent calls in ecocritical theory for a shift from local to global, and for attention to ways of promoting environmental consciousness by training us to move between one and the other?

The revival of the term Heimat since the 1970s

There was a noticeable increase in use of the term Heimat around the middle of the 1970s. Politicians began to refer to it in their speeches, the media were full of articles about it, it became a popular subject of novels and films (many of you will know Edgar Reitz's eleven-part tv series *Heimat* of 1984), and local Heimat museums started springing up all over Germany, Austria and Switzerland. In academic discourse, Heimat reemerged as a focus of interest and historical, political, sociological and cultural analysis: Peter Blickle has noted that between 1995 and 2002 some 400 books were published with 'Heimat' in the title. Hardly a month now goes by without the announcement of a new anthology of Heimat literature, a new sociological study, a new a Heimat film or art project.

Heimat as discourse, cultural construction and floating signifier

The traditional definition of Heimat is "a place or land either of birth or of long-term occupation/ dwelling". However, since the 1970s Heimat has been increasingly conceived of less as a place than as a socio-cultural sphere of security, identity and agency. Today, 'Heimat' is generally approached by theorists as a socio-cultural construction, defined and constantly redefined in a discourse involving political and cultural actors. The lasting significance of the term in German public life over the last two centuries is explained by its fundamental openness: Gebhard, Geisler and Schröter describe it as „less a clearly defined concept than a generator of associations". Answering universal psychological needs, it has been enabled by constant adaptation to serve as a response to shifting political and social circumstances. In his study of 2002, Peter Blickle argues that Heimat has been a „floating signifier" (the term is borrowed from Levi-Strauss), emptied of inherent meaning, and constantly in danger of taking on problematic ideological associations. Much of what Blickle has to say about Heimat is highly critical, but in his last two chapters, which are concerned with the resurgence of Heimat discourse since the 1970s, he is more positive, welcoming in particular the pluralisation of identities and Heimateen in contemporary Germany.

The problematic past

In the 1790s, Heimat emerged, in a context of political change and increased individual mobility, as a concept denoting a compensatory sphere of reassuring continuity with the past, community and proximity with nature. In the 'Heimat Movement' at the turn of the 20th century, Heimat again served as a rallying point for anxious German citizens, who were challenged by the political, social and technological transformation of the nation. Already associated with aggressive nationalism in the early 1900s, Heimat feeling was readily appropriated into the racist ideology of Blood and Soil in the Third Reich. Although largely discredited for this reason in post-war Germany, Heimat survived in both political discourse and popular culture (e.g. in the politics of the *Vertriebenenverbände* [associations of Germans who had been expelled from Poland and Eastern Europe in 1945] and the Heimat films of the 50s and 60s) as a signifier for attachment to locality, region and the nation, idealising these as sites of security for the individual and of the good life, a form of dwelling in harmony with society and nature.

Reasons for the revival of Heimat discourse

Several factors have been responsible for the resurgence of thinking about Heimat and local place-belonging in Germany since the 1970s. One is undoubtedly the weakness of postwar German national identity: Germany has always been a "nation of provincials" (Celia Applegate) with a strongly decentralised structure, but *Verfassungspatriotismus* (i.e. a form of patriotic feeling grounded in the democratic values embodied in the constitution) was beginning to be felt to be 'bloodless' by the 1970s, and lacking the emotional bond or glue necessary in order to make people prepared to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the community. Traditional forms of nationalism remained suspect, but Heimat, always primarily a belonging to locality or region rather than the nation, provided a way of filling the gap. The homogenising impact of Europeanisation also prompted Germans to take stock of their local identity, even if they were not proud of their nation.

In a wider, transnational context, the growth of Heimat feeling was a response to the experience of deterritorialisation, dislocation and alienation arising from globalisation. The fact that Heimat started cropping up in unexpected places in German writing and speeches after the oil crisis in 1973 suggests a link with the social consequences of economic recession. Other countries too began to experience a strengthening of local and regional feeling at this time: in France, for instance, there has been a revival of interest in *pays*, *patrimoine*, and *terroir*.

In Germany the development was accentuated by reunification. In the East, *Ostalgie* emerged in the 1990s as a new form of collective identity based on the shared experience of socialism, and the loss of a way of life in which community played a central role. At the same time, reunification facilitated the revival of regional identities in some of the *Länder* which had been suppressed in the GDR (e.g. in Saxony). In the West too, local and regional identity have benefited from anxieties generated by the passing of a perceived era of socio-economic security in the old West Germany.

A further significant factor is the ethnic diversity in German society which resulted from the settlement of immigrants since the 1960s. For the immigrants themselves, this raised questions of *Heimat in der Fremde*, i.e. the ability to make oneself at home abroad, and of the possibility of multiple identities, loyalties and place-belongings, of participation in multiple linguistic and cultural communities. For the Germans on the other hand, the multicultural society challenged conceptions of

Heimat based on the exclusion of the unrelated and unpropertied, and in doing so raised troubling questions about the importance of values and traditions, and openness to cultural diversity.

A final factor, to which I will return, has been the environmental movement.

The shift to a new understanding of Heimat and place-belonging

Among the cultural anthropologists, ethologists and sociologists who have played a crucial role in the reinterpretation of Heimat are Hermann Bausinger and Ina-Maria Greverus. In her paperback publication *Auf der Suche nach Heimat* (The Search for Heimat, 1979), Ina-Maria Greverus presented to a wide general readership the principal ideas in her learned, 470-page *Habilschrift* (second doctorate), *Der territoriale Mensch: Ein literaturanthropologischer Versuch zum Heimatphänomen* (Territorial Man: A Study of the Phenomenon of Heimat from a Perspective of Literary Anthropology, 1972). The earlier book explored attitudes towards place and Heimat in the 19th century through the medium of literature and popular song. It painted a picture of conscious fostering of Heimat feelings for family, community and the good old days, as a substitute for more emancipatory forms of identity and security which might have been attainable, had active political participation not been denied German subjects. Greverus described how *Heimatkunde*, or Homeland Studies, taught in schools in the 19th and early 20th century used allegiance to place and local community to promote subordination of the individual to the collective, and loyalty to political leaders. A similar thrust is detected in the activities of the Bund Heimatschutz (Association for the Protection of the Heimat), founded in 1903. Long before the formulation of the Nazi ideology of Blood and Soil, Heimat as a 'sphere of satisfaction' and its alleged endangerment by foreigners served to direct aggressive militarist energies and stabilise the political system.

Heimat as territorial imperative

However, at the same time, Greverus argued that Heimat was simply a German variant of a universal human *territoriality* – one whose preconditions and diverse forms across a range of societies had indeed already been studied for some time by American anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists. She adopted the concept "territorial imperative" from the influential anthropologist and behavioural scientist Robert Ardrey (*The Territorial Imperative. A Personal Enquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations*, 1966). For Greverus, the term had a dual meaning. On the one hand, it implied a spatially-related behavioural characteristic of the human species. And on the other, an obligation on the state and political leaders to allow citizens to satisfy this need both in and through a space. She also drew on Jacob von Uexküll's concept of animal environments, arguing that we define our identity at least in part through relationship with place. Active appropriation of a space, shaping it and making ourselves at home in it, which are not to be confused with ownership (see p. 24), is described as the third universal dimension of human identity, operating alongside continuity of consciousness between past and present, and self-realisation in the social context (p. 28).

The Search for Heimat is a celebration of Heimat feeling in its redefined form as "the emotional relatedness of subjects to a socio-cultural sphere affording or seeming to afford them identity, security and agency in shaping their lives" (p. 13). In other words, Heimat helps overcome fear, anonymity and inability to act, by holding out the promise of "territorial satisfaction" (p. 17). Heimat is no longer conceived as a fixed space, but as a spatial correlate of universal human behavioural patterns.

Greverus's book picked up on the critique of *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte* (The Inhospitableness of Our Cities, 1969) by the leading sociologist of the sixties, Alexander Mitscherlich, and the utopian Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's invocation of Heimat in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (The Principle of Hope, 1959) as a sphere of humanity and democracy enabling individuals to realise their creative potential. It anticipated a great deal of thinking about place, place-belonging and the role of place in identity formation in political statements, academic writing and fiction over the last 20 years.

Heimat feeling as care for the environment

A key factor driving this redefinition and rehabilitation of Heimat was the environmental movement, which began around 1970 in Germany, somewhat later than in the USA. Greverus's book, *The Search for Heimat* was in effect a response to the reclamation of the concept by the environmental movement in the course of the 1970s. "Heimat ist wieder aktuell, ja geradezu zu einem neuen Protestbegriff geworden" ("Heimat is in again, it has become a new focus for protest", p. 20), Greverus notes. She depicts the new Heimat feeling as an overcoming of individuals' alienation in society through expression of solidarity with others with whom they share interests and needs. Joining *Bürgerinitiativen* (Citizens' Initiatives) and participating in protest action decoupled Heimat from 'nation' and freed emotional bonds with place from their ideological baggage. Transformed by its use during the occupation of the site of the planned nuclear power station in Kaiserstuhl in 1975, the concept had become a valuable "remainder of living tradition, from which responsibility for the future is derived" (p. 20). Maintaining and regaining Heimat was a dual struggle against destruction of the natural environment and human alienation from a specific local environment affording orientation. It was no longer a question of the state being one's Heimat, but of whether Heimat could become possible within the state (p. 16).

Heimat as a political challenge

Greverus describes Heimat not as something which exists, but as a political goal and a challenge: "Creating the conditions for Heimat is a political goal which goes beyond the purely quantitative improvement of environmental protection, social justice and equal opportunities, however important these may be. It means supporting people in their individual and personal self-establishment in a territory which they wish to appropriate actively and shape as their Heimat. The quality of life associated with Heimat is not inherited at birth, nor can it be prescribed. It is rather an achievement of the active subject appropriating their environment. To give people a real opportunity for self-determining action of this nature, that is the 'political challenge of Heimat'." (p. 17)

Place belonging and environmental consciousness

Important ideas which have since been debated in social and cultural theory, and in literary ecocriticism, were then anticipated by Greverus over thirty years ago. It was for instance commonly argued by first wave ecocritics that place-belonging plays a key role in developing environmental consciousness. Emotional attachment to a place makes us more sensitive towards environmental changes in it, and more willing to take action to protect it. The grounding of environmental ethics in place belonging often assumes that our families have lived in a particular place for generations – and

that we therefore desire to preserve a way of life which is familiar to us, and which we see as intrinsically right and good.

Heidegger's conception of 'dwelling' has been a major source of inspiration for theorising our relationship with the natural environment. For Heidegger, dwelling involves not only *belonging*, but also *safeguarding* and *preserving* place. This means not so much nature conservation as kinds of inhabitation, cultivation and building which are sensitive to the environment: actions which enhance nature and 'bring it into being' rather than subjecting or 'enframing' it. Environmental philosophers including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans Jonas, Arne Naess, Michael Zimmermann, Michel Serres and Freya Matthews have since argued for physical immersion as a way for individuals to reintegrate in the biotic community, and developed an ethics of spatial proximity which is grounded in phenomenology.

However, the assumption that environmental consciousness necessarily follows from sense of place, and that sustainable behaviour can be fostered by simply reconnecting individuals with place, has come under fire. Ursula Heise's book *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* sought to redress what she saw as a serious imbalance in our thinking about place. Celebrating locality should, she argued, be subordinated to efforts to foster a sense of global belonging and responsibility. Heise writes critically of the persistent dominance of pastoral elements in environmental literature, philosophy and cultural criticism, and challenges their holding up of local knowledge and "respect for the land" as ideals. Traditional place-attachment has become an anachronism, and she proposes 'eco-cosmopolitanism' as a more appropriate goal today.

Developments in space and place theory

Among the most instructive parts of Heise's book are passages on the challenge to the concepts of place and situatedness stemming from postmodernity and globalisation. Drawing on a wide range of thinkers, she demonstrates a broad consensus about the change which has come over society over the last three decades. Frederic Jameson has written about the loss of orientation which is reflected in paradigmatic works of architecture, and against which it behoves artists to engage in processes of cognitive remapping. Arjun Appadurai describes detachment from place as one of the cultural consequences of globalisation. The weakening of place-belonging is also an aspect of the 'disembedding' which Anthony Giddens has described as characteristic of Late Capitalism. David Harvey has given insight into space-time compression as a key feature of contemporary society and culture, and Ulrich Beck writes of an expropriation of the senses which transforms the relevance of place.

Locatedness and *embodiedness* nonetheless remain desirable social and cultural goals, and place and practices of inhabitation seem set to continue to play a role in both identity construction and fostering environmental consciousness. However, traditional conceptions of place-belonging clearly need to be adapted to present-day circumstances. While continuing to be rooted in phenomenology, contemporary conceptions of place and inhabitation have drawn increasingly not only on postmodern and globalisation theory, but also on postcolonial and feminist thinkers such as Homi Bhaba, Doreen Massey and Rosi Braidotti.

Gender and nomadism

Massey argues for instance in *Space, Place and Gender* that place must be conceived of as itself constantly changing. It must also be thought of as relational, i.e. defined by its links with what lies beyond it, rather than bounded by the counterposition of one

identity against another (p. 7). Problematic association of places with notions of an 'authentic' home to a particular population can be avoided through recognition of their multi-layering and openness to others. Space is in her words "an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" (p. 3), and place an undoubtedly significant, nevertheless only momentary stabilisation of its meaning. Like individual and national identity, which come into being over the years through a layering of interconnections with the wider world, the identity of place must be recognised as always unfixed, contested and multiple.

Another significant contribution to thinking about contemporary place belonging has been the conception of active, mobile dwelling developed by Deleuze and Guattari, and described by them variously as fluid, rhizomatic, and nomadic. Nomadism foregrounds flux and hybridity, and embraces the shifting, multilocal belonging and polyethnic places typical of contemporary life. Chapter 12 of *A Thousand Plateaus* presents nomadism as a constant source of social and cultural renewal, harbouring the potential for an alternative way of relating to nature, women and animals. The form of inhabitation of the nomad is a dwelling while moving. He arranges himself in open space as opposed to entrenching himself in a closed one.

The feminist thinker Rosi Braidotti has further developed the concept of nomadism. For her as for Deleuze and Guattari, it consists "not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere" (p. 16). The defining characteristic of the nomadic subject is being "in transit yet sufficiently anchored to a historical position to accept responsibility and therefore make [yourself] accountable for it" (p. 10). This involves a conscious choice "to inhabit [the] historical contradictions and to experience them as an imperative political need to turn them into spaces of critical resistance to hegemonic identities of all kind" (ibid.).

Literature and film as windows onto changing attitudes towards place

One of the ways of examining contemporary German attitudes towards Heimat and measuring them against these ideas is to look at their reflection in literary texts. Literature invests ideas with cultural resonances and dramatises conflicts. Its typically complex forms of representation, involving symbolism and ironic framings as well as realistic presentation, can give access to otherwise obscured nuances in cultural values, and the meanings people attach to aspects of everyday life. Fiction can also explore the problems and contradictions these meanings lead to, modelling patterns of behaviour with the intention of encouraging or warning against them.

Traditionally, literature has played a central role in fostering a sense of place and constructing collective place-identity. Gaston Bachelard pioneered thinking on the part played by literature and poetry in promoting inhabitation through textual imaginings and rememberings of intimacy with place in his book *The Poetics of Space* (1958). What images and narratives do recent German literary texts and films provide as concrete equivalents of such theoretical concepts as non-proprietary belonging and nomadism? What role are they playing in imagining identities involving alternative relationships with place – relationships promoting identification with and care for the natural environment, while conceiving of place as a basis for *solidarities* (to use Massey's term), rather than *differences* between individuals and peoples? Answers to these questions might be found in

- Heimat novels in the broadest sense, including regional narratives and documentary films, and literature of place and personal/ collective identity
- migrant literature and film

- East German literature
- travel writing and road movies
- nature writing and landscape poetry
- autobiographies.

Jenny Erpenbeck, *Visitation*

The German original of Jenny Erpenbeck's short novel *Visitation* came out in 2008 under the title *Heimsuchung*, and the translation by Susan Bernofsky was published in 2010. The book is described on the cover as a 'haunting evocation of a home and its buried secrets'. Over 150 pages, Erpenbeck tells the story of an idyllic lakeside property near Berlin and the history of a summer house built there in the 1930s. We learn how the land was parcelled out and sold by the local estate owner, how the central lot was bought by an architect who worked on Hitler's Germania project for the transformation of Berlin, how his summer house was designed with loving care and combined modern technology with a traditional thatched roof, and how he bought the next-door property with boathouse and jetty at a knockdown price from its Jewish owners when they were forced to sell up in 1939. (Some members of the family make it to South Africa, but others stay in Germany and end up in Auschwitz.) We read how the house was briefly occupied by Russian troops in 1945, taken over by the East German state when its owners fled to the West in the early 1950s, and leased out to a writer who had spent the war years in communist exile in Moscow with her family. In the 1970s, the returned émigré writer is allowed to buy the house from the state, but not the land it stands on. After her death, her son shows no interest in it, and it is left empty. The reunification of Germany in 1990, the return of the government to Berlin and the city's economic development make the property highly desirable. The heirs of the original owners submit legal claims, and a protracted legal battle over its ownership ensues. By the time the case has been settled, the house has decayed badly, and the story ends with its demolition by new owners to make way for a new build. But only after the granddaughter of the last owner to live there has illegally reentered it, and cleaned, polished and partially refurnished the rooms, in a leave-taking which involves reflection on good and bad, happy and sad moments in her childhood and in the country's history.

I have called the book a novel, but it is difficult to classify in terms of genre, since it combines historical detail with poetic invention. The earlier parts of the story have been extensively researched, and the later ones are transparently autobiographical. As an imaginative reconstruction of the past, it stands out through its lightness of touch and stylistic subtlety, its combination of authentic fact with literary symbolism, and the even-handedness with which the author explores the feelings and actions of all the characters, revealing their suffering at the same time as exposing their failings.

Nature is present throughout: the book opens with an account of how the landscape was formed in the ice age, and describes in some detail how the central property, which was woodland surrounded by farms up to the 1930s, was landscaped by its architect owner, and how changes in ownership and use were reflected in planting and building. For over half a century, it has served as a retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city, a place for swimming and sailing, relaxing and entertaining guests. But the idyll is a dark one, for the place bears the traces of authoritarian social structures, the subjugation of women, fascist racism, war, communist dictatorship, and finally globalisation and the triumph of neoliberal capitalism. This is above all a

book about a place, the meaning it possessed for its inhabitants, and their different ways of inhabiting it. Erpenbeck's nuanced presentation of different forms of living there, and relating to others, the community and the environment, provides both negative and positive models of dwelling. The un-hyphenated compound in the book's original German title, *Heimsuchung*, is correctly translated as 'visitation', which can signify an official visit for the purpose of inspection, a divine punishment or comfort visited on an individual, or simply a calamitous event or experience. However, a secondary meaning of the title which cannot easily be conveyed in English is evoked by its two parts. It is simultaneously a tale of 'Heim-Suchung' (searching for home), and indeed of 'Heimat-Suchung' (searching for the homeland). The title thus neatly implies that the quests for local and national identity are bound up with each other, and overshadowed by Germany's troubled past. The lives of the house's occupiers exemplify the violence and injustice of the country's twentieth-century history.

Visitation illustrates many of the aspects of the new conception of place-identity which I have identified as emerging in the reconfiguration of Heimat over the last 40 years:

- it can be read as demonstrating the need for a non-exclusive form of dwelling, a kind of belonging leaving the place open to others and not necessarily involving legal ownership;
- it implies the need to accept the temporal limitation of human dwelling, and suggests that belonging does not necessarily involve continuous, long-term inhabitation, that it ends naturally in a passing on of place from one generation or family to another, and that it involves awareness that places are themselves constantly changing;
- it shows how home is something always to be made, place belonging is something to be earned by the individual through commitment and effort;
- it exemplifies a relational conception of place, an attachment embracing awareness of the connections between this place and other, far away ones which nevertheless shape its fate (in this case above all Berlin, the Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz). And it incidentally shows how human lives can be blighted by confinement in place and oppression there;
- it can be seen to describe a nomadic form of dwelling relating to place as what Deleuze and Guattari call smooth as opposed to striated space;
- it demonstrates the parallel between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature;
- and last but not least, it models a dwelling in harmony with nature.

Time does not permit exploration of these dimensions. However, since this paper is concerned with the environmental turn in the conceptualising of Heimat, I will finish with a few words about the mysterious figure of the gardener, who has a special relationship with nature. Persons in the book such as 'the architect' and 'the writer' are not given names, and become generic figures, representing a social grouping or way of life. However, the process is taken farther with the gardener. The narrative is punctuated by short chapters or sections headed 'The Gardener', in which his work and actions are described. He is both a real historical person and a timeless, mythical figure. When the story begins in the 1930s, we are told that he is already there, living in an abandoned shooting hut in the woods. At the end, which is some time around 2005, he has become very old. But he does not die, just disappears. The gardener can be described as a 'green man', a figuration of the living force of nature, and of the

spirit of the place. He helps the local people with their seasonal tasks, and carries out jobs for a series of owners, planting, watering, grafting and pruning, clearing leaves, felling unwanted trees, and keeping bees – activities recalling Virgil's *Georgics*. Similarly, there are Thoreauvian traits in the radical simplicity of his way of living. Above all, though, the gardener demonstrates a form of place belonging involving caring for and tending to nature. Nature is, in the words of Hartmut Böhme, a 'cultural project', and home something to be earned.

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